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ABSTRACT

Today's top 10 educational issues are: (1) children held in low esteem; (2) changing work force demographics requiring a new vision of training and hiring objectives; (3) a corner-cutting ethic promoting mediocrity; (4) the development of ethnic "beachheads" which impede the assimilation of immigrants into American society; (5) leadership guided by public opinion polls; (6) the prevalence of competitions and contests in schools; (7) reliance on "rubber" yardsticks in place of national education standards; (8) continued erosion of federal support accompanied by lack of financial equity in the schools; (9) preoccupied parents who spend little time with their children; and (10) a geometrically expanding information base requiring multimedia approaches transcending the printed word. A great deal of cooperative energy will have to be expended to convert these challenges into opportunities for improvement. (MLH)

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The Top Ten Educational Issues

EA 021 879

Macomb Community College

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Foreword

This is the beginning of the second decade for education's only systematic trend watching and issues management program.

The national program was developed in 1980 to help educators become more proactive--to help them anticipate emerging trends and manage them in the most favorable arena.

On the next page, I begin a review of the past decade, and identify the top five issues of the eighties. The section is titled "Decade Done."

For those who are more eager for the forecast than the reflection, the top ten issues for the new decade begin on page 5.

Dr. William J. Banach
January 1, 1990

Decade done

*M*y work during the past decade reaffirms that, like most Americans, educators are not proactive. It is the unusual professional--in both the public and private sectors--who looks beyond the fourth quarter or the urgency of the moment.

So, in many ways, looking ahead for opportunities is a lonely assignment. You never know who will see the smoke signals or how they will be interpreted. And you often feel that warning signs will be ignored.

Over the past decade, some of our issues have been relatively straightforward. For example, the home school movement (1983) was easy to forecast, and matured along classic issues management curves.

Other issues, such as teacher shortages (1984), were met with disbelief. Administrators were too busy filling vacancies from layoff lists to look ahead to imminent shortages. Today there are school districts actively recruiting teachers overseas!

Like teacher shortages, most of the issues we've identified linger on. In fact, I always point out that the issues in the annual top ten list won't go away at the end of the year. The aging population (1984), knowledge as capital (1986), and control of special education (1987)--to name just three--will impact schools for years to come.

There were, of course, a few issues which didn't materialize. About 10 percent of our issues went askew. Gentrification (1983) showed little action initially. Then, in 1985, there was a brief spurt of well-educated young people moving to the cities, rebuilding neighborhoods, and placing demands on urban schools. But the issue never matured.

Terrorism (1984) was another issue that never developed. I called this the unthinkable issue, and always hoped the forecast was a mistake. Then one day education had a close call. Two people armed with gasoline cans took hostages in an elementary school. But

their plan ran amuck and the crisis was over . . . at least for the moment.

Now, in a developing trend, we may be headed toward a related issue. During the past several years, a variety of violent episodes have affected our school children. Every American recalls the horror of the AK-47 playground shooting in Stockton, California. There have been numerous accounts of gangs and violence-based "movements" involving and affecting our children. And the nightly news is rarely without stories describing drug-related violence inflicted upon the country's young people. Current trend lines continuing, societal violence may well become a significant issue affecting education during the 1990s.

Now, as a prelude to the decade dawning, I offer a final look back and a forecasting glance forward.

All things considered, five issues from the decade past deserve special mention. They impact educators in significant ways, and continue to demand our attention. No doubt they will serve as preludes to the emerging issues of the 1990s.

1. **Governance.** There are 16,000 school districts in America. They are governed by lay boards and led by superintendents. And they employ people who belong to a host of professional organizations. The very structure of this governance system produces lots of motion but few results. There are, quite simply, too many people rowing in too many different directions.

   One consequence of the governance morass is that most school districts do not have a vision of what they should look like in the year 2000. Most, in fact, do not have a vision of what they should look like in 1990! Governance may well rank as *the* most important issue because it is the key to meaningful educational change and the development of a future orientation for our schools.

2. **Lip service.** When it comes to education, people talk a really good game. Politicians campaign on a platform of better schools, yet follow up their election by introducing or supporting legislation which adversely affects education.

Business people criticize the quality of graduates, but offer simplistic solutions and nominal help. And parents themselves tend to offer minimal support for the educational process (and even less when the issue is money). Too often educators are expected to address myriad challenges and cure society's ills with only lip service as a partner.

3. **The control of special education.** Things have changed since the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975. Youngsters who would have died back then now survive, thanks to advances in medical science. Yet, many of these youngsters have handicaps so severe that they are in danger of dying at any minute. They often have a nil educational prognosis. In fact, they are called "medically fragile."

   Youngsters in this category require extensive support systems which routinely have annual price tags in excess of $100,000 per child. And that's the issue--economics.

   School districts cannot afford this level of expenditure. The danger is that medically fragile youngsters (and other complex handicapping conditions not considered in 1975) will bankrupt the system. Then the special education of all handicapped youngsters will be adversely affected.

4. **Internationalization of the curriculum.** The global village is upon us. Geographic and even political boundaries are now routinely ignored in pursuit of commerce, education and the social good.

   Students must be helped to understand the relationships which exist between nations. They must appreciate the worldwide implications of economic and environmental planning. And they must learn about the delicate balances which exist on our globe.

   Functioning in such a world requires that students understand the history, culture, politics and economics of other countries. It also dictates the need for a new emphasis on human dignity and worth.

5. **The meantime society.** It appears we are on course for a bifurcated workforce. At one end of the continuum there will be a few people who are economically successful (the haves). At the other end of the continuum will be a much larger group of economic have-nots. The middle class of the past will move toward the ends of the continuum.

   While education does not guarantee fortune in such a society, it is the ticket to the game. Without schooling, people won't even be in the game.

   As we move beyond the industrial era through the information society and into the biogenetic age, education will help people adjust to unprecedented change. It will help leaders plan meaningful tomorrows. And it may well determine each person's end of the continuum.

Finally, as a prelude to the decade ahead, I offer a repeat of last year's overall forecast: The school of the future will be market-driven. It will listen to its clients and provide them what they want. If what people want cannot be provided, the market-driven school will explain why. That's called responsiveness. It's also called good business.

But there's more to the market-driven school. It will help people see things beyond their horizons. And when people find value and need for these new discoveries, the market-driven school will provide them, too.

The lessons of the past decade are clear. The marketplace will prevail. It has deregulated banks and airlines. It has forced quality into products. It has created a consumer orientation. And it has bankrupted the nonresponsive.

The market-driven school will become the school of choice. It will, quite simply, be the winner of the decade ahead and the new century just around the corner.

The top ten educational issues

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Children in low esteem

A majority of U.S. families have no children under age 18.

The number of single person households has doubled in the last 15 years.

Seventy percent of new home buyers need two incomes to make the mortgage payment.

These demographics speak to the aging of the population, changing value systems and economics--three forces which are converging to place our nation's children in low esteem.

For many, children have become an economic liability . . . or at least a detriment to the good life.

Many Americans have raised their children and transitioned to "nonparent" status. They often begin this new era of their lives by developing an "I've done my share" attitude. Then they move to "adults only" condos with "NO Children" signs at the swimming pool.

The first symptom of the new attitude is increasing numbers of negative votes in school referenda. The second sign is that governmental spending on children declines. (There are now seven times as many poor children as there are poor people over age 65. Perhaps that's because the federal government spends over a quarter of its annual budget on people ages 65 and older.)

For many, children have become an economic liability . . . or at least a detriment to the good life. It costs an average of $140,000 to raise a youngster from birth to age 18. Hence, raising two youngsters is easily a quarter-million dollar commitment--not counting college tuition, room and board!

In a society where two incomes are required to keep up with the Joneses, most materialists place children on the liability side of the balance sheet.

Here's the paradox of the issue: Educational quality deteriorates when children are placed in low esteem. In turn, lower quality education produces a lower caliber workforce. And the lower quality workforce ultimately leads to a society which is unable to sustain those who neglected it in the first place.

People who devalue the presence of children need to be reminded of the old cliche: "What goes around comes around."

Shaping the century ahead

About 60 percent of education's workforce will change during the 1990s.

Whether it's retirement, relocation or reassignment, staff demographics present education with a profound opportunity. Capitalizing on it will require an assessment of purpose, and an evaluation and revamping of hiring and training practices.

Personnel people must be vision-oriented and understand what the organization seeks to accomplish. Reaching full potential will require personnel people to have a focus beyond filling "a slot" in the employee list. Their job will be to recruit people who have skills and value systems consistent with the culture and vision of the organization. After all, employees they hire during the 1990s may well stay with the organization for half a century. Schools cannot afford to make a "50-year commitment" on the basis of a cursory application form and a brief interview.

The starting point is a vision of the best that can be--a "picture" of the institution in its ideal state. This vision must be followed by a statement of organizational purpose which people believe and accept.

Without a vision, mission cannot be defined and positive organizational culture can't develop. Lacking culture, there can be no goals. And without goals, an institution cannot develop even modest potential.

Schools cannot affort to make a "50-year commitment" on the basis of a cursory application form and a brief interview.

Capitalizing on the opportunity of staff demographics also will require the customizing of training programs. Even the best generic education provided by the finest university cannot accommodate the specific needs of 16,000 school districts. Tailoring the employee to the culture and updating skills with appropriate training will remain an assignment to be executed locally.

It is time to marry the disciplines of organizational theory, personnel, psychology, management, human resource training, public relations and education. That's what it will take to produce a workforce which can deliver on the vision of tomorrow.

Cutting corners

Quality is the hallmark of the craftsman. The caliber of his workmanship and attention to detail create demand for his products and services (and bring premium prices, too).

But technology, plastic, mass marketing and changing values have endangered the craftsman. Today, most people don't have to (and many don't want to) take responsibility for their work.

They are in every office. They are hidden in our factories or buried in the bureaucracy. They are so deep in the structure that no one can find them. And so they develop a mediocrity mentality, and become masters at cutting corners--at getting by.

Children don't miss these lessons. What they observe in their role models and learn from parents and other adults is transported to the classroom. Assignments are missed, late or mediocre. Those on teams don't carry their share of the load. Work becomes something to be avoided instead of a source of pride and fulfillment. Attaining the average becomes good enough.

Those who skip today's lesson, neglect tonight's homework, or otherwise settle for mediocrity cheat themselves.

But those who skip today's lesson, neglect tonight's homework, or otherwise settle for mediocrity cheat themselves on their tomorrow.

They miss the sense of exhilaration which results from giving your best. They lose out on the feeling which can drive people to the limits of their dreams.

Exhilaration is powerful medicine. But it is not an elixir that one person can give to another. It must be self-generated.

America needs a national commitment to the building of character, responsibility and self-esteem. Our children need--first of all--parents and adults who model the characteristics of the craftsman--who demonstrate in their lives the attributes of attention to detail. They need to learn that commitment, responsibility and pride lead to both personal exhilaration *and* a job well done.

They need to learn from example that there are no shortcuts to high quality and performance. They have to learn that no one can build self-esteem by cutting corners.

Ethnic beachheads

Despite being tossed and blended together, the various ingredients in a salad maintain their identity. A similar phenomenon is occurring in America: the melting pot is being replaced by a salad bowl. Many immigrants simultaneously are trying to become Americans *while* establishing and maintaining ethnic beachheads.

The questions for the nation are clear: How can America remain unified and cohesive if every nationality is committed to strengthening its own ethnic heritage? How will we ever define--let alone attain--national goals?

During the last 15 years, the number of minority language children in America increased by almost one-third. And 11 percent of the country's population speaks a language other than English at home.

Some of the nation's school districts now offer--by court mandate--over 100 foreign languages. Such legal directives are attempts to address the needs of a growing minority population, but they snuff the fires beneath the melting pot.

While promoting cultural understanding is an appropriate role for public schools, preserving every ethnic heritage is not. Educators must deflect the political and social pressures which push them to cross the line between understanding and preservation. Attempting to preserve all heritages drains the system of both time and money, inhibits the maintenance of American society, and threatens to produce youngsters who *do* struggle with reading and math.

While promoting cultural understanding is an appropriate role for public schools, preserving every ethnic heritage is not.

Current headlines feature gangs, racism and ethnic slurs. There is concern about increased violence. Maybe there's a relationship to the ethnic beachheads. When schools become agents for the preservation of every ethnic heritage, they cannot promote cultural understanding and unity. Biculturalism must be seen as a detour on the road to becoming an American.

School children pledge their allegiance to "one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all." That pledge requires relentless pursuit. It requires that all Americans work together.

Maintaining native languages and ties with the fatherland is not a task for the public schools. It is a personal pursuit.

Leadership by poll

If Queen Isabella had taken a poll, Columbus never would have left port.

If Lindbergh had listened to the polls, he would have made a 180-degree turn for the hangar.

In too many arenas which impact education, polls are replacing leadership and risk-taking.

Polls are not designed to make decisions. They are designed to provide leaders with decision-making information.

But whether it's a quest for power or the preservation of positional authority, too many in politicized occupations allow their lives--and the lives they influence--to be shaped by public opinion. They abdicate their leadership responsibilities and seek shelter in "the will of the people."

Recent polls show public dissatisfaction with the schools. The polls also show public support for the concept of parental choice. Guess what the politicians are advocating: school reform and parental choice!

School people, too, have worked to become more responsive to an increasingly diverse clientele. They've become extremely sensitive to the public will. But educators are often handicapped by a lack of reliable data on the public will. Many times "the public will" is merely a reflection of three or four calls to three or four school board members. ("Everybody seems to be opposed!") And, on occasion, it's the opinions of the last two people who bumped into the superintendent. As a result, school people are frequently blown off course by incorrect reading of "the public will."

Many times "the public will" is merely a reflection of three or four calls to three or four school board members.

In education, leadership by poll and responding to political breezes are tied to lack of vision. Without a destination and a process for getting there, people cannot set a course for the future. They are forced to operate at the whim of political winds.

All effective leaders review polling data. They analyze the information in an attempt to make better decisions and improve communication. They understand the value of feedback and the knowledge polling can provide . . . and they use the data to accommodate four things every leader must do: 1. Help people see things they haven't seen before; 2. Help people do different things than they've done before; 3. Help people do more than they normally would; and, 4. Help people enjoy 1, 2 and 3.

Visionary curricula, student achievement and community harmony do not result from leadership by poll. It is one thing to watch for the signs of changing weather. It is yet another to be blown in the direction of every breeze.

Competitions and contests

"We need a new logo and slogan. Let's have a contest!" And so we turn the corporate identity of a multi-million dollar enterprise over to the fourth graders.

No company with even the smallest droplet of smarts would do such a thing. After 20 years in education, I can't recall any business that has summoned the neighborhood elementary school to ask for help on their logo, stationery design and corporate image. Yet, it happens routinely in our schools . . . and then educators wonder why they have a bad image.

Perceptions of public education are not favorable as we enter the 1990s. Relying on contests certainly will not produce the sophisticated communication needed to narrow the understanding gap between the schools and the people they serve.

Leading organizations are not built on contests or by competitions that produce more losers than winners.

How about a "name the newsletter contest"? The new principal--with a Bachelor's Degree and three years of graduate school on his resume--doesn't want to begin his assignment by naming the new school newsletter. Why create a controversy over such a trivial matter? So a committee of kids determines that it should be called "The Bulldog" or "Chipmunk Chatter" after the school mascot, or "The Bugle" or "The Blast" in honor of the band teacher. (Now you have a clue as to why most school newsletters are named after animals or something that makes noise.)

"Why not have a 'teacher of the year' contest?" suggests the local Chamber of Commerce secretary. "We can tie it to a special back-to-school promotion!"

Why this kind of contest? What about all the dedicated and competent teachers who won't be selected? What about the support staff? Why do we insist on contests that create one winner while making everyone else losers?

Contests do not bind organizations together. They tend, in fact, to have the opposite effect.

Leading organizations are not built on contests or by competitions that produce more losers than winners. Leading schools aren't built that way either.

Here's another golden rule for schools: If doing something requires having a contest, rethink whether the objective is a priority. If it *is* a priority, forget the contest and fund pursuit of the objective appropriately.

Rubber yardsticks

In basketball, the objective is to put the ball through the hoop more frequently than the opponent does. In law, the objective is to win the case. In medicine, everyone works to save the patient. But in education, there is no common goal.

Educators cannot tell a student or his parents what to expect after a dozen years of schooling--they cannot produce a contract which specifies the bottom line for a 12-year investment.

It is time to define what we expect every American youngster to know.

Instead of national goals for education, America has local control at its worst. And nationally measurable results will not become reality so long as every community can define a course of study.

People talk about the basics, and they discuss preparation for the world of work. But the fact is, neither educators nor politicians have articulated the ingredients of a quality education. Some school districts are so unsure that they award diplomas *and* certificates of completion (which signify that a youngster may not have learned much, but he did show up a lot).

America needs national standards for education. Perhaps the President should lock up two dozen of the country's brightest minds until they emerge with a proposal for focusing public education. And then the President ought to establish the goals and champion the changes needed to attain them.

America does not need to avoid the issue and do more testing in an attempt to discover what students do and don't know, can and can't do. (This was one of my top ten issues in 1987. I called it "Assessment Paralysis.")

America does need to involve educators in developing the proposal. To do otherwise would be like a Manhattan Project without physicists . . . a moon landing without astronauts.

America needs to guard against special interests narrowly defining educational outcomes. Business, for example, needs to appreciate that education is much more than workforce preparation.

It is time to stop meaningless measurement, and to dispense with the myths of local control. It is time to define what we expect every American youngster to know.

Then, we can provide the appropriate resources and assign the task of attaining national goals, providing educational equity and producing measurable results to the institution most qualified to get the job done: America's public schools.

Money

Educational funding has escaped the annual top ten list for a decade. Not so this year.

Quite simply, American public education cannot prepare students to be competitive in a global marketplace without federal financial support.

While legislative statisticians can produce data which show a significant flow of dollars into the educational enterprise, the reality is that federal commitment *and* financial support have declined over the past decade. In fact, during the 1980s politicians wiped out entire programs designed to help school children.

The Washington watchword was decentralization. Policymakers pushed educational decision-making to the next level--the state. But the real message was: "Don't look for any federal money. You're on your own."

State departments of education became proficient at asking local school districts to undertake $50,000 projects with $5,000 grants.

So, over the decade, the state share of educational funding has increased. But the increases were not only insufficient, they came with strings attached.

As state initiatives proliferated, legislators and state school boards adopted curriculum requirements and mandated programs which consumed the state funding increases. And state departments of education became proficient at asking local school districts to undertake $50,000 projects with $5,000 grants.

There are at least three bottom lines to the federal neglect of education.

First, the amount of federal assistance in most school districts has become an insignificant percentage of the local education budget. Washington has not helped schools make ends meet.

Second, the lack of federal commitment to education has resulted in a proliferation of state mandates and requirements which often place educators at odds with politicians and with one another. This has resulted in confusing goals and a muddled direction for education.

Third, we have not addressed the issue of financial equity in our schools.

The resulting educational dilemma for society is: As support for schools becomes more local, the arena in which graduates will perform is becoming more global.

Preoccupied parents

Parenthood is being redefined. It used to be that young people between the ages of 18 and 24 would fall in love, get married and raise a family. Now there are variations on the theme.

Young people still do fall in love, get married and have children. Others fall in love, get married and delay having children. Some simply fall in love and have children. And others fall in love, have children . . . and fall out of love.

In the paragraph above there are four definitions of family. Officially, there are eleven!

These are the parents of the children in our schools. While many are like "old-fashioned" parents, many are not.

Most have received no training in parenting, and have little knowledge of what it takes to raise a child.

These parents--all of them--begin their family by producing an "experimental child." This firstborn youngster teaches parents the intricacies of child growth and development by allowing them to try things. Experiments that fail lead to more experimentation. Experiments that work are used with the second child.

To receive a driver's license, applicants have to take a course, train behind the wheel and pass an exam. There are *no* requirements to become a parent, something infinitely more difficult than driving a car.

Go to the mall and observe parents and their children. Listen to these parental role models in action. "Git over here!" "You can't have no candy." "Put that down or I'll wack you a good one." The need for parental training becomes painfully obvious.

Mothers of preschoolers . . . spend less than 10 minutes per day playing with or reading to their children.

Today's parents juggle chores and careers in an attempt to accommodate a faster pace lifestyle. Too often the result is less time for everything--including parenting. Mothers of preschoolers who work outside the home spend less than 10 minutes per day playing with or reading to their children--the *same* amount of time as mothers who don't work. (Fathers, it's been estimated, spend seven minutes *per week* in direct contact with their children!)

Family diversity, parent skills and time are factors which converge at the schoolhouse door. They are factors which need to be addressed well before kindergarten.

Getting through the book

The numbers are astonishing. Information doubles every 900 days. Calculations are completed in billionths of a second. Data zips from one point to another at the speed of light. And, the pace is quickening.

At today's rate, the body of information will quadruple before a first grader graduates from high school!

How will teachers ever get through the book? Quite simply, they won't. In fact, this will be the last generation which uses the book as a primary learning tool. (This also has profound implications for standardized testing. Such tests, after all, are constructed by people who assume that youngsters have completed the textbook.)

How will all this information be packaged and stored? How will learners access it? How will they separate the useful from the extraneous? How will they process it?

The movement away from chemical packaging of information (printing, photography) to electronic (digitized data on disks, for example) will put more information in smaller places. The entire *Encyclopedia Britannica* now fits on a single compact disk . . . with room to spare!

Also included in such new "libraries" are sights and sounds that bring learning alive. You can "look up" Bach and listen to a fugue. You can hear Martin Luther King, Jr., deliver his "I have a dream" speech . . . or John Kennedy challenging America to have a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

This will be the last generation that uses the book as a primary learning tool.

Access will be by faster and faster computers. This means students will spend less time accessing information. It also means that they will have more time to think about what they have accessed. This will require teachers to develop new instructional strategies, new assignments and new measures of student progress.

Increasingly, the proliferation of information presents a double dilemma for teachers. They will have to struggle through volumes of information to remain current in their subject area, yet not be overwhelmed. They will have to become "knowledge managers." They will have to become skilled at understanding and synthesizing information so they can create new knowledge. And they will have to teach their students the same skills.

Textbooks will become the crutches of poor teachers. Multiple media will become the challenge of the professional.

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